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Effective Discipline: Guidelines for Parents

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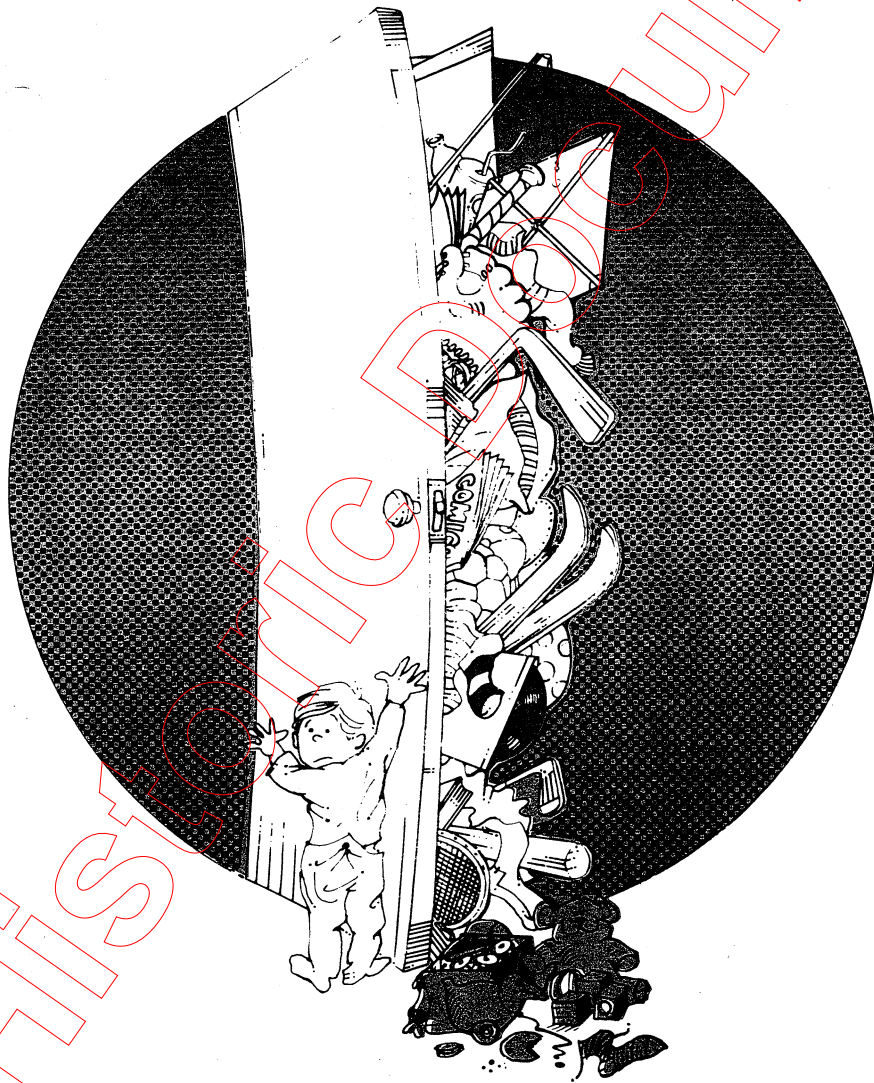
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Effective Discipline

guidelines for parents



Cooperative Extension Service, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.



Introduction

"Effective Discipline: Guidelines for Parents" examines one of the major issues confronting parents — the use of discipline in childrearing. Although it is frequently associated with such concepts as punishment, training, obedience, and regimentation, the word "*discipline*" originally referred to instruction and knowledge. This original meaning is given special emphasis in this bulletin. *Discipline is a problem-solving response utilized by parents to help their children learn.*

This publication presents some basic guidelines or principles underlying effective discipline. It was developed by Charles A. Smith, an Extension Human Development Specialist from Kansas State University. For further information or activities related to discipline and other child development issues, contact your County Extension Home Economist.

Judith A. Myers-Walls

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Effective discipline

Combines firmness with

Respect and affection

Discipline is *effective* when parents *teach* children self-control and other skills needed to develop successful relationships with the world. Through effective discipline, parents guide their children through the difficulties of growth and demonstrate their sincere love and concern for their children's well being.

On the other hand, discipline is *ineffective* when parents simply *punish* their children for misbehavior. With ineffective discipline, parents frequently reveal a greater concern for establishing strict conformity to rules than for promoting the child's personal development. Ineffective discipline typically places too much emphasis on correcting "bad" behavior instead of encouraging "good" behavior.

Rather than permissiveness, effective discipline involves reasonable firmness along with parental warmth; rather than restrictiveness, it demonstrates a democratic respect for children and enables them to reach out confidently to others.

Effective discipline teaches.

Effective discipline:

Child develops self-discipline.

Child develops feelings of responsibility.

Child develops greater self-esteem.

Child sees parents as source of strength.

Child respects parents.

Child learns through education.

Ineffective discipline:

Child obeys only when authority is present.

Child develops concern for own safety.

Child feels lowered self-worth.

Child sees parents as a source of danger.

Child fears parents.

Child conforms through training.

Remember, every Child is a Unique individual

*Every child
is different.*

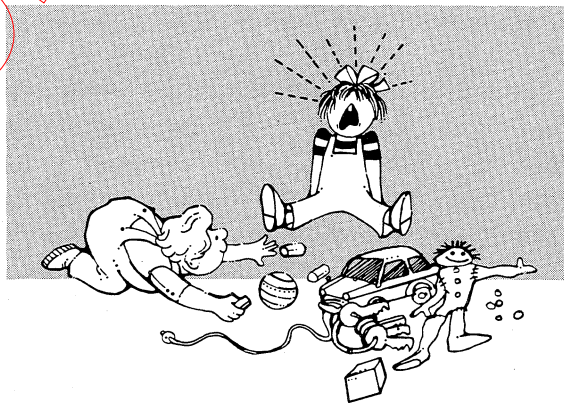
What may work well with one child may not work well with another.

No one can tell you exactly what kind of discipline would best work for your child. No one can know your child as well as you do. No one else has the opportunity to observe your child, build a relationship, and learn from mistakes as thoroughly as you.

Even children within the same family can be very different from each other. For example, one child may be very sensitive to criticism while another rarely appears to be so strongly affected, and one may be very socially outgoing while the other is shy. These individual differences are important to note when deciding what discipline to use.

Example: Marie is a sociable preschooler who enjoys a moderate amount of rough play with her peers. She tends to be argumentative and rarely shows any fear of adults. Her brother, Terry, is more socially insecure and sensitive to the disapproval of his peers.

When Marie is moderately spanked by her parents, she marches off to her room and slams the door. But when Terry is spanked his reaction is much more intense, and he becomes more visibly upset than his sister. While a mild spanking under some conditions **may** be effective for Marie, mild social disapproval may be all that is needed when Terry misbehaves.



Consider the child's age

When you respond

To misbehavior

Discipline and other forms of guidance will work only if they are appropriate for your child's age.

Because of their **limitations of memory**, younger children cannot remember "rules" and are easily confused by delays in discipline, while older children are more likely to remember past mistakes and anticipate consequences of their misdeeds. The younger the child, the more important it is that parents respond immediately to misbehavior.

Example: The mother of a two-year-old boy catches her son playing with his father's stereo one morning. She responds by saying, "Oh, oh! You just wait 'til your daddy gets home!" When the father arrives home, he becomes very angry and spans his son. All the child experiences is his father's anger. Since the child has already forgotten that he played with the stereo, he is confused by his father's actions. The mother should have responded immediately to the child's misbehavior.

Also, children's **ability to understand** what parents say is very limited during the early years. In general, the younger the child, the less you can expect him or her to understand. Long lectures do not work.

Example: A mother overhears four-year-old Sarah teasing her younger brother. She takes her daughter aside and explains what effects her teasing might have on her brother. She also asks why Sarah is teasing. The child responds, "I don't know!" The mother fails to realize that her child is too young to understand what is influencing her behavior or what effects her behavior could have on others. The mother might be more effective if she simply says, "Sarah! You are teasing your brother. If you do that he might feel sad or angry! Please stop!"

*a child
may forget
- or not
understand.*

Expect some Problem behavior To occur

*Every child
will misbehave.*

Healthy children will occasionally misbehave despite the best efforts of any parents. Although frustrating to parents, some kinds of misbehavior are positive signs that your child is growing up. Every child needs to gradually develop a sense of independence from adult authority. Because of their discovery that they are unique individuals with their own ideas and desires, children need to say "No!" to their parents. Although they may have to confront the child's negativism, parents should realize that a moderate amount of stubbornness in their children is a good sign their youngsters are growing up.

Parents should also realize that, in some situations, the child's way of seeing things may be in direct conflict with the wishes of the parent.

Gradually, as they grow, children can set aside some of their immediate impulses and conform to adult authority. But strict conformity should not occur too early in a child's life before he or she has a chance to develop some feeling of autonomy—a belief in one's own ability to care for oneself.

Children who **never** disobey their parents have lost awareness of who they are and what they really want. Because they have lost the ability to stand up for themselves, these children will have problems getting what they really need during their adult years.

Child's Way of Seeing Things:

Child is excited about splashing water when taking a bath.

Child enjoys touching food and dropping it on the floor.

Child enjoys giggling and wrestling with brothers and sisters at bedtime.

Parent's Wishes:

Parent wants floor to stay dry.

Parent wants child to finish meal and keep food on table.

Parent wants children to quiet down and get to sleep.

Try to discover What is influencing The problem

Because the aim of effective discipline is to **help children develop**, parents should try to understand and respond to the real problems that are causing conflict with their children.

In some cases, discipline is unnecessary or misdirected because the parent, not the child, is the one who is the problem.

Example: Mother walked into her three-year-old son's bedroom one evening and noticed he was touching his penis. She became very upset, called him a naughty boy and told him never to touch himself there again. But occasional, mild masturbation is very common as young children begin to explore their bodies. Instead of trying to understand and help her child, this mother may have responded to soothe her own anxiety about sexuality.

The parent may be the problem.

When parents realize they are contributing to the problem, they can try to change themselves and in some cases, involve their children in becoming more aware of and sensitive to their difficulty. In the example described above, mother should probably ignore her son's behavior. But if the same thing occurred in the presence of company, she might take him aside and point out that this type of touching may be offensive to others and should occur only in the privacy of his room. In this case, she would be helping him to understand what is acceptable in private would sometimes be objectionable in public.

But sometimes the child is the one who has a problem that contributes to his or her misbehavior.

The child may have the problem.

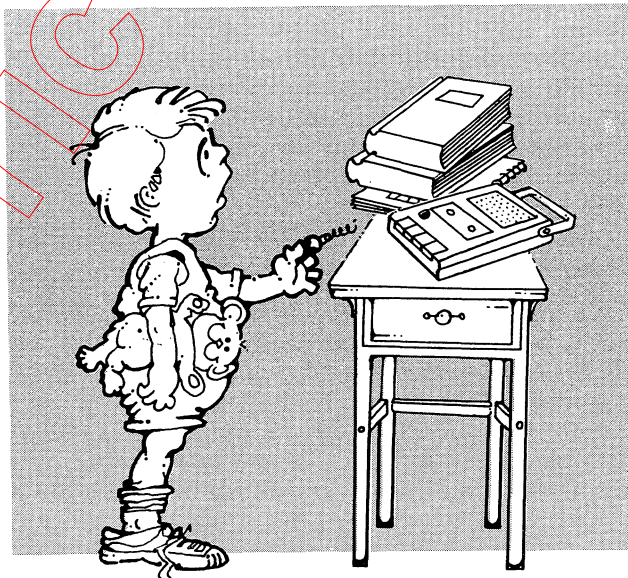
Example: When she arrived home from school in a grouchy mood, nine-year-old Vicky started an argument with her younger brother that quickly led to a fight. Father stepped in, stopped the hitting, and sent Vicky to her room to "cool off." Later, he went to her room and asked her if she had had a lousy day at school. Vicky then talked about some unpleasant teasing she had

received during the day. At the end of their conversation dad said, "Say, Vick, the next time you come home feeling grouchy, let's talk about it right away, ok?" Father was more interested in helping his child learn how to deal with her problem than punishing her for misbehavior.

In other instances, the situation could be influencing the misbehavior. If this occurs, parents could change the situation to prevent the problem from occurring.

Example: After discovering her two-year-old son playing with the knobs on the tape recorder, mother moved the machine to another shelf well beyond the child's reach. While doing so, she firmly stated "No touch!" but did not punish the child since she realized he was acting out of curiosity quite normal for a child his age.

Change the situation.

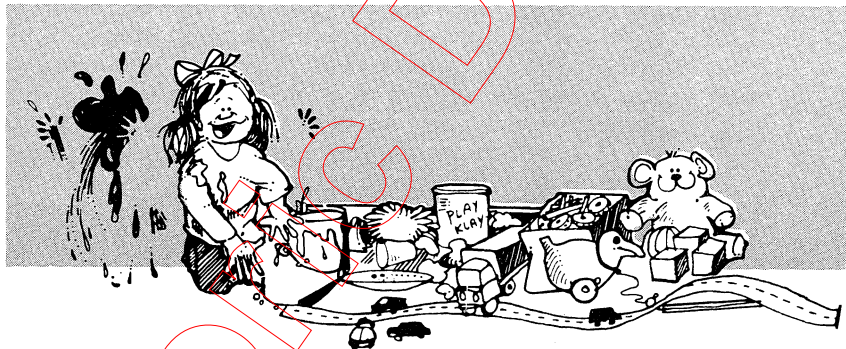


Make certain the Discipline fits The problem

One of the most troublesome mistakes parents make is overusing one specific type of discipline. If Johnny, for example, steals money from his mother's purse, he is spanked; if he beats up his younger brother, he is spanked; if he plays with his dad's tools, he is spanked; and if he burps at the dinner table, he is spanked. But different offenses frequently call for different types of responses from parents.

Choose the best discipline method.

Example: When four-year-old Sarah starts a fight with her younger sister she is given a "time out" in the kitchen corner; when she writes on the walls she is required to scrub them clean; when she improperly



throws a toy around she has it taken from her; when in an act of defiance she deliberately runs into the street without looking, she is given a firm swat to her rear and sent to her room. In each case, Sarah's parents are trying to match the discipline with the misbehavior.

The task for parents is to think of logical ways they could respond to a child's misbehavior and then select the response that is best suited to the situation. Children will remember their mistakes and develop self-control faster if the discipline fits the problem. For example, memory of the punishment of scrubbing the walls prevents the child from repeating the act, while the recall of a spanking, since it is not directly related to the misbehavior, may not remind the child that wall scribbling is not allowed.

*How serious
is the problem?*

Another guideline to consider involves adjusting your level of firmness to the relative importance of the behavior you want your child to learn. Sometimes parents make the mistake of being overly strict or overly permissive with their children in the wrong situations. For example, one parent might become very upset when a preschool child begins to wiggle and talk during church service, and then ignore the same child's abusive name calling of a neighbor child. Or, some parents may be always severely restrictive or completely permissive. Effective discipline depends on knowing when and how to be moderately firm or permissive depending on the situation, the severity of the problem, and the readiness of the child to learn.

Consider the Side effects of Your discipline

There are unintended effects of any form of discipline you use. What else is your child learning from your discipline?

Example: The parents of a four-year-old boy use spanking as their only form of discipline. Whenever the parents are near him, the child "behaves." But recently a parents have noticed that their son has been starting quite a few fights around the neighborhood and is getting the reputation of a "bully." The child has apparently learned another lesson from the parents' spanking: that physical violence is the best way to resolve problems.

*Discipline has
a broad impact.*

Example: The parents of a five-year-old girl have decided to severely reprimand their daughter for her refusal to obey and her tendency to talk back. Their discipline apparently "worked" because her misbehavior has stopped. But the parents have been getting reports from the kindergarten teacher that the child is frequently "picked on" at school and rarely "sticks up" for herself. The child has learned another lesson from the parents' choice of discipline: that the best way to get approval is to avoid being assertive under any conditions.

Parents could try to avoid these problems if they would stop and ask themselves, "Ok, maybe what I am doing is stopping the misbehavior, but *what else* is my child learning from the discipline I use?" A thoughtful response to this question might lead to the use of a different form of a discipline, one that reduces negative side effects.

Emphasize the positive When you respond To your child

*Encourage
desired behavior.*

Your responses to misbehavior should help your child learn what is expected of him or her rather than just what should be avoided. Parents should have some idea of the skills they want to nurture in their children rather than be primarily concerned with what their youngsters are doing wrong. Effective forms of discipline tend to emphasize "you cans" over "you don'ts."

The problem with "You don'ts" is that they fail to help a child understand what behavior is desired. Instead, they may trigger defiance, anxiety, or embarrassment, which interferes with learning what to do. "You don'ts" might clarify for children what they are doing wrong but "You cans" are needed to guide them toward better relationships. By emphasizing the positive, effective discipline becomes an educational tool.

You cans:

Try to be gentle with your sister.
Use your quiet voice when mom-
my's sleeping.
Listen to me now!
Please stay on the sidewalk!

You don'ts:

Don't hit her!
Stop talking so loud!
Stop looking around!
Don't go in the street!

Recognize and Learn from Your mistakes

Parents are not perfect. Those who struggle to be the perfect “super parent” are doomed to fail and feel inadequate. All of us need to understand that mistakes are an inevitable part of life.

There will be times when, because you are feeling especially tired or tense, you might respond incorrectly to your child’s misbehavior. Maybe your voice is too harsh or your spanking overdone. You have had enough control over yourself to avoid child abuse. But you have made a mistake; you are human. You regret what you have done and would like to change. What now?

Parents make mistakes.

We can all learn from our mistakes, explore other ways of dealing with our child’s behavior, and become more acquainted with our own limitations as parents. Children provide us with countless opportunities to learn about our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Once we understand these problem areas within ourselves, we can manage the situation better.

Example: Sally, the mother of two preschoolers, has been having problems with her children just before dinner. The children have been running around the house, getting into things and making a lot of noise. On several occasions, Sally has spanked and yelled at the children and, as a result, has been getting headaches regularly at this time. After thinking about the problem, Sally realized that she is “on edge” at this time of day. Now, before she begins dinner, Sally prepares a small, nutritious snack and sets up a quiet activity, such as drawing or working puzzles, for the children.

Because she recognized her own tension and fatigue, this mother was able to correct the situation before it became a problem. Sometimes, though, parents need help in learning how to resolve problems with their children. Asking for help—from your doctor, mental health professional, or Extension home economist—is nothing to be ashamed of. It is a sign of strength and courage that reveals our real concern for our children rather than an admittance of failure and weakness.

Use the "Over the shoulder" Perspective

When you discipline your children, imagine that they are now adults and are observing what you are doing "over your shoulder." How would they react? What would they say to you? What would they urge you to do?

*How will
our children
remember us?*

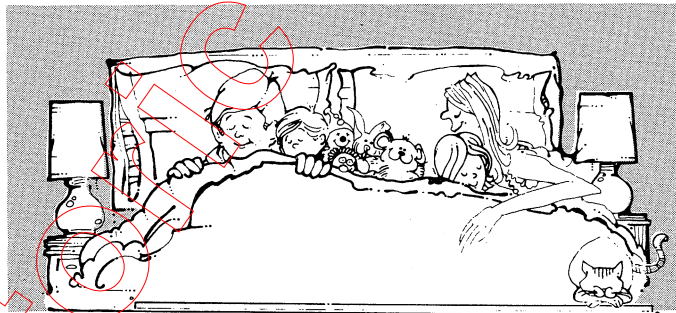
The time to consider these questions is now, when we have the opportunity to become better parents rather than later when we have to face our grown children and answer for past behavior that can never be undone. Unfortunately, we sometimes forget that children are people, *people who deserve respect*, people who will remember someday how poorly or how well we have fulfilled our responsibilities as parents.

We do not own our children; they own themselves. As parents, we are simply temporary caretakers, nurturing and encouraging growth in our young ones until the day they can assume full responsibility for themselves. When this judgment day arrives, will our children respect our best efforts and forgive us for our own human imperfections? Or will they condemn us for our insensitivity, harshness, or lack of guidance?



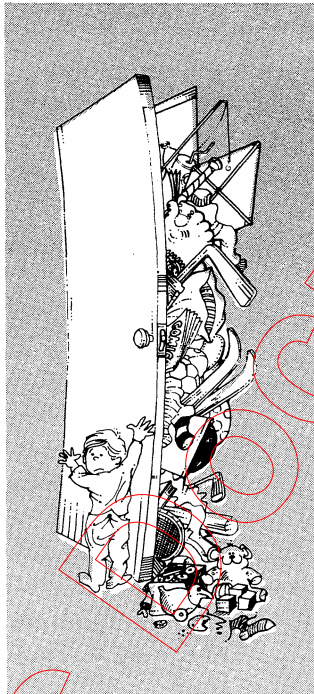
In conclusion . . .

It is hoped that the ten guidelines or principles described in this bulletin will encourage you to think of discipline as a problem-solving strategy that helps your children learn to cope more successfully with their world. **But there are no cookbook solutions to the problems of parenting.** Our effectiveness as "life-guides" for our children depends on our self-confidence, our willingness to learn and change, and a sincere valuing of our children and ourselves. These attitudes form the foundation for our continuing development as parents. The task is challenging. Whatever childrearing frustrations we may experience as parents are insignificant in comparison to the great satisfaction we will someday feel for successfully nurturing healthy development in our children.



Suggested Readings

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